

Editorial

When Are Organizations Sustainable? Well-Being and Discomfort in Working Contexts: Old and New Form of Malaise

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The proposal for this Special Issue is related to a question that is increasingly present and debated by both researchers and practitioners [1–12].

We can say that it is a question whose relevance, on the one hand, in ethical and productivity terms, “transcends” contextual situations and, on the other hand, is inextricably intertwined with the specific organizational dynamics taking place at the micro-, meso-, and macro levels.

The complexity of the topic certainly encourages rich and substantial scientific production [13] and the current debate on well-being resulting in many works with using approaches this topic becoming the focus of. Thus, as shown by Taheri et al. [13], there is an increasing number of theories and models aimed at describing and explaining how various factors influence well-being (vs. discomfort) in organizations. Some of these are related to job characteristics or are at the individual level (e.g., meaningful work, self-control skills, psychological capital, job security, successful education, sense of control of affairs, and the ability to accept the realities of life), while others are found at the group- and organizational levels (e.g., organizational support, better interpersonal behavior, transformative leadership, organizational culture, etc.). That is, well-being is the result of the combination and the mutual influences of many causal factors. Among the issues that have emerged over the years, we believe that three are particularly relevant and require further attention.

The first of these concerns is the fact that, when focusing on well-being, researcher and practitioner recommendations have often been to shift attention away from factors that are usually associated with performance [7]. According to some authors [7,14], these recommendations are supported by the fact that the dominant approaches focus on performance without paying attention to discomfort. The risk of with this kind of approach is to foster a sort of binary logic in practices, with performance and well-being in two necessarily antagonistic positions [15–17]. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the potential compatibilities between performance and well-being while keeping both ethical and economic needs in mind [7,18–21]. In other words, researchers should explore how promote adequate levels of performance while not compromising well-being. The second relevant issue is that, there is very often polarization or a split between organizational and personal/individual factors, and rarely are personal, relational, and organizational dimensions considered to be intertwined [22,23]. Finally, the third issue is linked to the fact that new forms of malaise are developing (such as malaise from remote/smart working; dependencies on work; fear of those who are ‘different’; survival syndrome; fear of change), and attention should be paid to different types of organizations, not only corporations or hospitals, but also to prisons, social cooperatives, professionals working with migrants, and sports [24–28].

Based on the articles published in this Special Issue, some illuminating areas for reflection can be outlined.

As well highlighted by five of the contributions [Appendix A contributions 1–5], the boundaries between well-being and malaise can no longer be approached in terms of less



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sharply defined forms, the contours of which take on the complex nuances of increasingly flexible and multifaceted professional identities. Promoting an organizational environment that can protect the well-being and development of professionals requires paying attention not only to ‘macro-dimensions’—such as perceptions of safety and continuity over time, the need for relationships and appreciation, the enhancement and development of skills, and autonomy in assuming the role—but also to how these factors can assume different connotations and perceptions in relation to ‘micro-dimensions’, such as, for example, gender and age. What professionals have been looking for since the very beginning is a self-actualization process in a context attentive to the growth of professionals and connoted in terms of awareness, flexibility, trust, and organizational justice. This means that attention should be paid not only to aspects of remuneration but also to the construction of an organizational context ‘imbued with’ meaning.

It is already clear from these contributions that it would be reductive to limit the reflections to merely individual issues, but two papers [Appendix A contributions 6, 7] specifically emphasize how a systemic dimension is implicated in the topic of well-being-malaise can be translated into in the terms of the quality of organizational and managerial ties and processes. In fact, the quality of organizational life (understood as the balance between the productivity, effectiveness, and well-being of the professionals who inhabit organizational places) cannot be separated from reflections on the sustainability of workloads, the sharing of clear organizational mandates, and the development of ‘spaces’ that make relational exchanges and confrontation regarding differences possible.

These factors are also crucial with respect to the impact that organizational change (regardless of its nature and extent) can have in terms of well-being or malaise. As pointed out by one of the contributions [Appendix A contribution 8], when changes are not accompanied and supported by a process of sharing and group’s functions do not find full expression, there’s a high risk that the organizational change process is perceived anguished and threatening and that professionals will express resistances against it. Thus, a lack of working practices oriented toward exchange (both vertical and horizontal) among organizational actors determines the impossibility of activating processes of critical understanding, redefining work, and the possibility of authentic adherence to what is required. In this sense, change can therefore be understood as a magnifying glass, a sounding board that amplifies and makes the factors within an organization that are crucial in determining the degree of well-being and malaise more clearly discernible and thus is able to intervene to make the organizational context and its dynamics more oriented from a sustainable perspective.

Finally, two of the contributions [Appendix A contributions 9, 10] highlight how organizations can work to invest in well-being by maintaining a multilevel vision and promoting dialogic and participatory research and intervention processes. These papers clearly show how processes that activate different organizational actors to orient professional practices in terms of shared priorities and goals are crucial to preserve well-being while developing new projects and to aggregate resources to implement them. Participatory and reflective processes at the individual, group, and organizational levels can disrupt dynamics that are non-functional for well-being and enhance the essential factors of organizational sustainability: organizational learning, dialogue, relationships, community, identity, and belonging. Practices include supervision and mentoring to explore personal meanings and emotions related to work and establishing a level of communication that can strengthen relationships and initiate collaboration; collective storytelling to reposition organizational cultures and values that circulate; and generative humour to address unresolved issues related to one’s profession, stress, and fatigue. Nowadays, the possibility of understanding the meaning of work and regaining a sense of agency in one’s practices is a key element for the well-being of professionals and for requiring progressive commitment to the system of relationships within the organization. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that dialogic practices and participatory processes are instrumental in supporting not only well-being from an individual perspective but also in connecting different organizational actors. Dialogic and participatory processes are crucial in delineating the boundaries of an

organizational context based on mutual accountability, sustainable careers, and a healthy work environment.

In conclusion, if we think of the organization as a living being, it seems natural and physiological for it to go through periods of order and disorder, stability and instability, and well-being and malaise. This is precisely why we believe that urgent new questions are upraising and cannot be neglected, but rather should guide future developments. If well-being in organizations can be thought of more as a process rather than a state, in the movement along this spectrum from well-being to malaise, what are the signs of vitality and possibility to pay attention to? How can they be monitored over time? Insofar as well-being in the work environment as the result of the interaction and the relationship between the characteristics of individuals, groups, and the whole system, how can organizational actors be proactively and consciously involved at every level of the hierarchy to achieve a sustainable level of well-being in organizations?

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Appendix A Contribution List

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